

# Honesty in Communications

by Josephson Institute on January 17, 2011

Honesty requires a good faith intent to convey the truth as best we know it and to avoid communicating in a way that is likely to mislead or deceive. In the language of the courtroom oath, an honest person tells the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. There are three aspects to honest communication: truthfulness, sincerity (non deception), and, in relationships of trust, candor.

**Truthfulness.** Honest people are truthful. They do not intentionally misrepresent facts, intentions, or opinions (we call this lying). Intent is crucial to the distinction between truthfulness and truth. We can be truthful and, therefore, ethical, even if what we say is not actually true. Being wrong is not the same thing as being a liar. An untruth told as the result of a mistake or error in judgment is not an act of dishonesty. Of course, honest mistakes can still hurt trust to the extent they reveal deficiencies in terms of reliability and carefulness, but a person who makes a mistake is not dishonest.

An unfortunate confusion on this issue, one that has trivialized the significance of lying is the phrase, "So, I lied," as a flip response when caught in error. Lying is an honesty issue, not a competency issue. Honest people make mistakes. Liars lie. Because lying is a moral transgression of intent, it is far more serious from a moral perspective. When we expand the domain of lying to honest mistakes we tend to increase our tolerance of lying.

**Sincerity/Nondeception.** Honesty requires more than truthfulness. Deception is an act (sometimes including silence) intended to cause another person to believe something that isn't true. We can deceive and mislead without ever telling a lie, but it is just as dishonest to deceive with half truths and tricky wording. It is as wrong to deceive as it is to lie.

An Illinois legislator was named by a local magazine as one of the ten worst lawmakers in the legislature sent out a mailer to his constituents proudly proclaiming that he had been "singled out for recognition." Now, what he said was literally true, but he said it in a way that was clearly intended to mislead.

What about advertising claims that announce "one-third less calories" when this glorious achievement was actually accomplished by reducing the recommended portions by one-third? A particularly audacious example of advertising deception was reported by *Consumer Reports*. Brut spray deodorant came out with new packaging prominently featuring the words "Now More Brut." The can was indeed bigger. Well, the cap on the can was one quarter inch bigger. What was in the can? Less product. The manufacturer defended this odiferous ploy with the argument that the amount of musk (the ingredient that gives that Brut-ish smell), had not been reduced. Therefore, it said, the proportion of the musk to the other ingredients was greater, resulting in more Brut smell. That explanation stinks. Perhaps that technical evasion could dodge a charge of lying, but there can be no question that the packagers intended to deceive consumers into thinking that they were getting more deodorant for their money.

The test to uncover deception, however subtle, is very simple: If the person communicated to comes to learn the truth concerning the facts, motivations and intentions behind the communication, does it undermine trust? Are you more or less likely to believe the state legislator once you realize his out of context reference? Do you feel the manufacturer of the deodorant was honorable in its relations with customers?

Sincerity is an important virtue because it breeds trust, just as insincerity breeds distrust. Unfortunately, people who want to be trusted but are unwilling to be trustworthy also are willing to be insincere about sincerity. Oscar Wilde, in his inimitable fashion, said that sincerity is a most important human virtue; once you can fake it, you have it made. Real sincerity precludes all acts intended to create beliefs or impressions that are untrue, misleading, or deceptive, including deliberate omissions, half truths, and out-of-context statements.

**Candor.** So far, I've dealt with lies and deceptions resulting from statements and deliberate half truths, but does being honest sometimes require us to volunteer information even when we are not asked? Yes.

In personal and business relationships, which create special expectations of mutual trust, honesty requires candor, the obligation to volunteer information that the other person needs or wants to know. Candor is required in our closest relationships — those between parent and child, coach and athlete, teacher and student, husband and wife, movie star and plastic surgeon. It is also required between employer and employee and between business partners.

This does not mean we have to volunteer everything we know or think — your hair looks awful, the speech was boring, my mother hates you, I hate the sweater. The moral duty of candor exists only in trust relationships and only when forthrightness is expected. That is, we don't always expect or want others to give us their unsolicited opinions or foist upon us facts that could ruin positive feelings or assassinate other relationships.

When we ask others to trust us, we assure them that they can rely on us to act on their behalf, to protect them. That is why trust relationships require us to be candid, sincere, and guileless. We are obliged to reveal things that those who trust us ought to know for their own good, or want to know so that they can make informed decisions.

Suppose, for example, that your high school daughter has been suspended from school for three days. By accident, you see her in the mall on one of those days and you accuse her of cutting school. She says she isn't cutting — because she was suspended. "Why didn't you tell me?" is the likely response. "You never asked," might be her answer. "Knock it off! You betrayed my trust. And you know it," you might conclude. Her failure to be candid in this setting probably is no less damaging to your trust than if she had blatantly lied. You have a right to expect that your children will tell you about such matters. It is important and they know it is important. Similarly, an employer has a right to know that a project will not be finished on time or that the computer was broken.

**Justifiable Dishonesty.** Honesty is an extremely important quality, but it is not, an inviolable principle of ethics. All lies are dishonest, but not all lies are unethical. There are times when an

ethical person can be dishonest. Police, for example, are morally authorized to lie in undercover operations to catch drug dealers and corrupt politicians. In such cases, society has concluded that its interest in the ethical principles of citizenship and lawfulness outweighs the suspect's interest in being treated with honesty. If that were the only exception, however, the rule of honesty would be pretty much intact since few of us can use this excuse (even police officers can use it only under judicial supervision). There are other times when lies are morally justifiable, when the end clearly justifies the means. Lying to the Nazis to save Anne Frank or to terrorists to save the lives of innocent people makes moral sense.

*Article available at: <http://josephsoninstitute.org/business/blog/2011/01/honesty-in-communications/>*

## Code Name Verity by Elizabeth Wein- The nature of truth (article 2 of 2)

[psychcentral.com](http://psychcentral.com) <http://psychcentral.com/blog/archives/2013/06/10/take-your-friendship-to-the-next-level-with-honesty/>

# Take Your Friendship to the Next Level — With Honesty

Recently I had dinner with an old friend, whom I hadn't seen in a long time. Over burgers, we shared updates on our lives. Our conversation began at a surface level, but as the waitress refilled our Diet Cokes and we doused fry after salty fry in ketchup, the topics grew more personal.

As we talked, a red-light warning flashed across my brain: you're over-sharing! I took a moment to reflect: Was I?

Here's what I realized: through our conversation, I was starting to be more and more honest with my friend. And that felt a bit uncomfortable.

In any interaction of substantial length, be it with a store clerk, coworker, or friend over coffee, we eventually hit a point when we encounter the opportunity to be personal. This doesn't have to mean revealing our deepest, darkest secrets. It might just mean sharing an opinion, thought, or personal experience — and this can feel scary because we risk the other person's judgment, disagreement, or negative reaction.

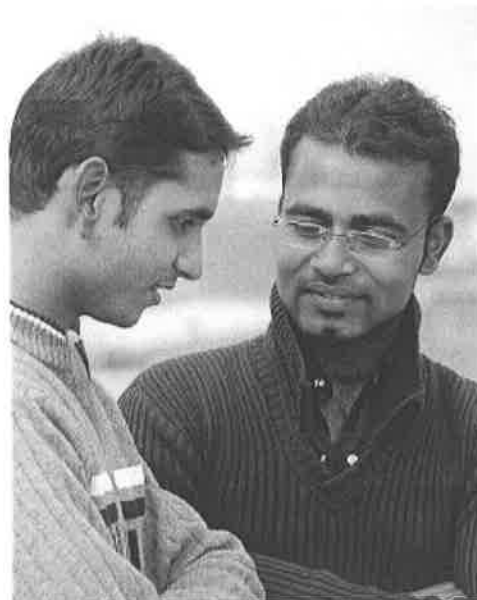
When conversation dives below surface-level conversation topics, you have to decide – get out and swim free, or stay in the boat? Vulnerability requires some degree of braving the unknown, and for many of us, we are scared to go there.

Yesterday I came across a great example of brave honesty online when I discovered Allie Bosch and her illustrated blog *Hyperbole and a Half* for the first time. Allie took a blogging hiatus beginning in 2011 and returned last month to share with her fans why she hadn't blogged in nearly two years. In a two-part blog post, she revealed that she'd been deeply depressed. She illustrated and wrote about this confession of sorts in a style only she can achieve — endearing, witty, and surprisingly, almost disarmingly, honest.

Allie's vulnerability about her depression amazed me. No doubt this has reached millions of people, and she just came right out and shared. I tried to comment on her blog, only to discover that BlogSpot shut off comments at five thousand comments! Have you ever come across a piece of content on the Internet with so much interaction? It seems that when other people are vulnerable, we feel we can be vulnerable, too. It sparks a chain reaction of sorts.

When thinking of how one person's vulnerability can spark the same in others, I think of the 2008 film *Gran Torino*. If you haven't seen the film or need a refresher, Walt Kowalski (played by Clint Eastwood) is a hardened Korean War veteran estranged from his adult children and shut off to the world, religion, relationships, and most of all, his Hmong neighbors.

Throughout the film, the audience watches breathlessly as Walt's Hmong neighbors initiate contact with him. His initial response is cold, and all he wants is to be alone in his house.



However, the Hmong family is persistent, and as Thao and Sue, two teenagers next door, share their lives with Walt, Walt in turn shares his with them. The three develop what could only be called true friendship. Walt's incredible sacrifice at the end of the film is perhaps the greatest tangible portrayal of his love for his new friends. His friendship with them, prompted by honesty, ends up redeeming his entire life.

There's no question that opening up is uncomfortable at times. But often, our relationships don't truly bloom until we've nurtured a spirit of trust that allows us to open up. Only then are we able to experience the healing power of honesty.

So how do you cultivate vulnerability in your relationships? If you're like me, and are a little hesitant to open up, here are some ideas to get you started:

- **Kindle friendships.** Honest communication only happens in trusting relationships. Nurture your friendships so they have the chance to be these places of healing confession.
- **Don't force vulnerable moments.** It's already scary enough to be real with someone because the real you, in honest communication, is exposed to criticism or judgment. Let these moments occur organically for other people. Don't push people into the spotlight and try to make them open up — it will only make them close themselves off.
- **When people share honestly, listen.** Receive someone's honesty with the respect he or she deserves. Listen with care and love.
- **Foster trust by withholding judgment.** In moments of vulnerability, some people are already a little gun-shy, and a harsh word of criticism could do a great deal of damage to your relationship. You may not agree with what's being said, but do your best to let the person have his or her turn.
- **Allow yourself to be honest with others.** If someone has been honest with you, it's a perfect opportunity to be honest with them. Often one person's vulnerability prompts a vulnerable response from the other person, especially if they can relate to what's been said.

The gift of vulnerability can bring encouragement and healing, resulting in deeper relationships with others and the feeling that we are not alone.

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